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"The Death of Sympathy." Coal Mining, Workplace Hazards, and the Politics of Risk in Britain, ca. 1970-1990

Jörg Arnold*

Abstract: »Das Ende des Mitleids. Steinkohlebergbau, Gefahren am Arbeitsplatz und Risikopolitik in Großbritannien, ca. 1970-1990«. This article employs the concept of risk as a lens through which to explore discursive constructions of the nature of coal mining and coal miners in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on a diverse primary source base, ranging from songs and poetry to parliamentary debates and government files, it contextualises and refines labour historian Dick Geary's observation about the "death of sympathy" for the miners in the coal strike of 1984/85. It argues that over the course of the period, coal miners turned from an object of risk into its subject; they were transformed, in political discourse, from heroes and victims into enemies of the state and society. Although the notion that coal miners were a "special case" on account of the hazardous working conditions in which they laboured, continued to resonate in popular culture throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the political bargaining power of the "blood on the coal" argument became progressively eroded after its successful application in the strikes of 1972 and 1974. By the time of the strike of 1984/85, Conservative opponents of the miners' cause had turned the argument on its head: The very hazardous working conditions were taken as proof of an obstinate refusal of the industry to go with the times. The real danger, they argued, were not health hazards, but the miners themselves.

Keywords: Coal mining, health hazards, cultural representations of coal strikes of 1972, 1974 and 1984/5, coal miner as hero, coal miner as enemy.

1. Introduction¹

In a famous essay published in the aftermath of the Great Miners' Strike of 1984/85, the British Marxist historian Raphael Samuel speculated that

the willingness of the miners to risk their all in the strike [...] might be thought to have some ultimate origin [...] with the peculiarities of an industry

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on which the face worker is engaged, in the last analysis, in a daily wager with death (Samuel 1986, 9).

Samuel looked towards workplace hazards in order to understand the remarkable resilience shown by mining communities across Britain's coalfields during twelve long months of struggle against pit closures. In so doing, he tapped into a rich cultural tradition that depicted the figure of the coal miner as distinct from other types of manual workers.² According to this tradition, the coal miner was uniquely endangered by the environment in which he worked. While his work was dangerous, it was also essential for society at large, for "our civilisation," as George Orwell famously put it in 1937, "*is founded on coal*" (Orwell 2001, 18). The coal miner's very willingness to engage "in a daily wager with death" made him deserving of both sympathy and admiration. Yet this special status also made him potentially dangerous to the status quo, as Orwell evocatively recognised when he juxtaposed the notion of "poor drudges underground" with the dynamic image of "shovels [being driven] forward with arms and belly muscles of steel" (Orwell 2001, 30 et seq.). If the "poor drudges" only came to realise the extent of their power, would they not hold it in their hands to change "our civilisation" beyond recognition, just as the Morlocks in H. G. Wells' celebrated short story "The Time Machine" (1895) had done in an imaginary future (Wells 2005)?

This paper is interested in the intersection between broader discursive constructions of the coal miner and the political struggles over the future of the British coal industry in the 1970s and 1980s. It traces contrasting narratives of risk in British public discourse and links them to social conditions. It assesses the uses that were made of these narratives in the political arena, and by whom. The discursive constructions were informed by three different understandings of risk. First, there were risks in the sense of hazards to which the miners themselves were exposed in their work – the "daily wager with death" of which Samuel speaks, often expressed through the phrase "blood on the coal." Second, risks were defined as the danger that the coal miners, as organised workers with considerable industrial bargaining power, posed themselves to capitalism, or in another variant, the UK as a liberal democracy. Finally, risks were defined in the sense of the threat that the product of the miners' labour, the fossil fuel coal, presented to the natural environment as a major pollutant.

This paper draws on a diverse body of primary sources, ranging from cultural artefacts to debates in the House of Commons, from pamphlets and speeches to the internal files of the British government. It falls into two parts. Part one focuses on two cultural artefacts, a song and a poem, in order to illustrate the health hazards facing coal miners and to explore their resonance in popular culture. Part two looks in detail at the political debate surrounding competing

² The literature on the strike is vast. For a critical evaluation see Hordt (2013).

ideas of risk in relation to the industry. The article builds on, but contextualises and refines, an observation by Labour historian Dick Geary about “the death of sympathy” for mineworkers in the strike of 1984/85, which, he contends, was one of the reasons for the ultimate failure of the strike (Geary 2005, 43). The article argues that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, depictions of coal miners as heroes deserving of admiration and sympathy persisted in the cultural sphere but were progressively marginalised from mainstream political discourse. This was partly because the link between cultural representation and actual working conditions had become rather tenuous by the early 1980s. But it was also because the second understanding of risk, according to which the coal miners themselves were the real danger, began to overlay the first narrative. Meanwhile, the third understanding about the dangerous environmental impact of coal played a marginal role only during the period. It did not displace earlier understandings of risk until the turn of the twenty-first century.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a crucial phase in the history of the British coal industry. The period may be characterised as a false dawn that spawned hopes and illusions about a bright future for the industry that were soon to be disappointed. Yet heightened expectations took on a life of their own, and arguably played no small role in accelerating the long-term trajectory of decline and in defining its conflictual nature. The 1970s followed upon years of contraction which the preeminent authority on the topic, writing in the early 1980s, has called “the most difficult time ever known in the coal industry” (Ashworth 1986, 324). Between 1958 and 1973, coal’s share in total UK energy consumption fell from 80 percent to 37 percent (Ashworth 1986, 39). Of the six traditional markets for coal – domestic, gas, private industry, railways, steel and electricity – the industry lost the first four and came under severe pressure in the field of electricity generation by the switch to oil-burn in power stations and the nuclear power programme (Robens 1972, 58-87). The scale of the run-down of coal in the decade preceding the 1970s was indeed remarkable: Between 1957 and 1970/1, manpower was cut from 700,000 employees to 287,000, while the number of producing collieries fell from 822 to 292. Meanwhile, total output was reduced by one third, from 227 million tons in 1957 to 145 million tons in 1970/1 (Ashworth 1986, 672-86). Yet, contraction went hand in hand with considerable gains in productivity, due to the wide introduction of mechanised methods of coal getting.

By the early 1970s, when the restructuring had been largely completed, there were grounds for cautious optimism towards a viable future of deep-coal mining in the UK. As the National Coal Board (NCB), the corporation that had been created after World War II to run the newly nationalised industry, made clear in its annual report for 1970/71, “The industry is now in good shape and is increasingly seen to offer a secure and promising future to recruits” (Ashworth 1986, 236). Prospects were enhanced further by the oil price shock of 1973, which saw the price of crude oil rise fourfold, dramatically improving the

market position for coal. Together with the transformation in the energy market modernisation thus appeared to have created remarkable opportunities for the renaissance of an industry that only a few years previously had been considered as “condemned to death” (Dennis et al. 1969, 9). And indeed, the tri-partite “Plan for Coal” of 1974 was premised on the assumption that in the field of electricity generation, coal would enjoy a competitive advantage over oil for the foreseeable future. It proposed major new investment and up to 42 million tons of new capacity (Ashworth 1986, 357-63; Department of Energy 1974a, 8). The plan was accompanied by a recruitment drive that sought to shed the image of coal as obsolete and to lure young men into the industry by promising “big money” and “great prospects.”³ King Coal was back in power and was looking towards extending his reign well into the twenty-first century. Or so it seemed.

Yet less than a decade later, by the early 1980s, the optimism had evaporated. The market share of coal was shrinking, permanent productivity gains had proved difficult to achieve, and there was developing a serious over-capacity in the industry. As the official history summarised the situation in rather understated terms, “The current position and immediate prospects of the coal industry [...] could hardly fail to produce feelings of disappointment” (Ashworth 1986, 430). The National Coal Board and its successor after privatisation in 1994, UK Coal, announced ever new rounds of closures, this time in the name of cost-efficiency, but the goal of stabilising the industry on a competitive footing proved elusive.⁴ In early 2015, only three deep-coal mines remained in operation, employing 2,500 people, around 1 percent of the workforce of the 1970s.⁵ By December of the same year, they had closed down as well.

Related to this volatile trajectory of decline, rejuvenation and reversal was an unprecedented upsurge of industrial conflict, with three national disputes in little over a decade (1972, 1974 and 1984/85). The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) fought the disputes of the 1970s over the question of wages both in absolute and relative terms. The miners demanded substantial pay rises of 35 percent to 47 percent in 1972 and of a further 31 percent in 1974 in order to come closer to realising NUM president Joe Gormely’s celebrated vision of “a nice house [...] a good education [...] a Jaguar at the front door [...] and a Mini at the side to take [the] wife shopping” (Gormley 1982, 186). Yet of equal importance was the goal of raising the coal miner’s status vis-à-vis other industrial workers by restoring him to the top of the industrial wage table. By comparison, in 1984/85 the mineworkers went on strike over the question of securi-

³ NCB, “Get it all together as a skilled miner” (no date [c. 1974]), in University of Sheffield Special Collection, Hines Papers, PRC/11.

⁴ “Only Mineworkers will suffer from overtime ban,” Coal Board Chairman Calls for Positive Attitudes, NCB Public Relations Press Release, 23 October 1983, in: University of Sheffield Special Collection, Feickert Documents, 202/F1/1: NUM 21.

⁵ They are Kellingley Colliery in Yorkshire and Thoresby Colliery in Nottinghamshire, run by UK Coal, as well as the employee-owned Hatfield Colliery in South Yorkshire.

ty of employment, both for the coalminers themselves and their children's generation. While the NUM was successful in the confrontations of the early 1970s, it failed to secure any concessions from the management of the Coal Board, or indeed any settlement whatsoever, in 1984/85. Despite the differences in motivation and outcome, the strikes shared in common an unusual degree of politicisation. They represented highly symbolic confrontations between labour, capital and government whose significance extended far beyond the immediate issues over which they were fought.

The trope of "blood on the coal" commanded respect across the political spectrum at the beginning of the 1970s, but lost purchase as the decades wore on. Supporters of the miners' cause, hailing from the industrial and political wings of the labour movement, invoked it to good effect in the disputes of 1972 and 1974. Yet, ten years later, by the time of the great miners' strike, the "blood on the coal" argument had become marginalised from the centre of the political debate. It became the preserve of radical historians such as Samuel and politicians in retirement such as former Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Meanwhile, at the centre of the decision-making process, in the House of Commons, opponents of the miners' cause from the Conservative Party did not just feel confident to dismiss the argument out of hand, but turned it on its head; they now cited the very occupational hazards that had been such a source of admiration and sympathy as evidence of the miners' obstinate refusal "to face reality" and to move with the times. While defusing the persuasive power of the "blood on the coal" argument, these opponents extolled a different kind of risk altogether: They spoke of the danger that the coal miners, through their union, posed to the future prosperity, and indeed survival as a parliamentary democracy, of the British nation as a whole.

In short, the paper makes the case for a temporal succession in the salience of contrasting narratives of risk, but recognises their considerable overlaps, and indeed, spatial variation in British society during the 1970s and 1980s. The shift from object to subject of risk, from hero to enemy, can be understood in dialectical terms: The very success that the coal miners enjoyed in the struggles of the early 1970s reinforced fears about their disruptive power that had been lingering just beneath the surface of the sympathy and admiration that they commanded. As radical Labour politician Tony Benn observed in a diary entry in 1975, "The only time working-class people are allowed to become heroes is when they are trapped, dying or dead [...] If there is a pit disaster [the miners are heroes], if there is a wage claim, they are militants" (Benn 1989, 400, 471).

2. "Blood on the Coal" as Cultural Representation

Of the two narratives of risk, the occupational health hazards facing coal miners resonated more broadly and deeply in British culture. The risks that miners

took at work and the very harshness of their lives had been depicted in fiction, feature films, autobiographical accounts and popular song. As Beatrix Campbell commented in a critical revisiting of George Orwell's classic account from a feminist perspective in 1984,

Miners are men's love object. They bring together all the necessary elements of romance [...]. That makes them victim and hero at the same time [...] – they command both protection and admiration. They are represented as beautiful, statuesque, shaded men. The miner's body is loved in the literature of men, because of its work and because it works (Campbell 1984, 97).

There were two main dangers to which the miner's body was exposed during his work. The first danger was the risk of getting injured or killed by an accident on the job or an explosion or other calamity in the pit. The second danger was the risk of contracting an occupational disease. The precise nature of these hazards may be illustrated with the help of two cultural artefacts, a song and a poem, written in 1958 and 1985, respectively. Furthermore, a discussion of these representations helps to gain insights into the broader societal resonance that the heroic image of the coal miner commanded.

The first artefact is a folk song, "The Ballad of Springhill," which tells the story of a notorious disaster, an underground earthquake in a colliery in the mining town of Springhill in 1958. In the incident, two groups of miners could be rescued a week after the explosion, but 74 of the 174 miners who were trapped underground did not survive (Greene 2003). Although the town of Springhill was situated in Nova Scotia, Canada, the incident attracted widespread media attention in the UK and the English-speaking world more generally at the time. It made a strong impression on English songwriter Ewan MacColl, who together with American folksinger Peggy Seeger wrote "The Ballad of Springhill" in 1958. Thirty years later, the Irish rock band U2 included the song in the playlist of their "Joshua tree" world tour. U2 in turn had been inspired by a popular rendition of the song by the Irish folksinger Luke Kelly of the folk band, The Dubliners.⁶

The song is divided into nine stanzas. It opens by setting an elegiac tone through establishing a close connection between place, work and death. The first stanza reads, "In the town of Springhill, Nova Scotia / Down in the dark of the Cumberland Mine / There's blood on the coal and the miners lie / In the roads that never saw sun nor sky / Roads that never saw sun nor sky." This is a story of victimhood, but also of tragic sacrifice: "Bone and blood is the price of coal," stanza two reminds the listeners, hinting at the huge debt that society owes to the "barefaced miners" for the labour that they perform (without yet feeling the need to spell out the precise nature of this debt – this, after all, is

⁶ For the lyrics and a brief contextualisation see the entry in "The Atlantic Canadian disaster songs project," 2015, curated by Heather Sparling <<http://disastersongs.ca/the-ballad-of-springhill>> (Accessed April 23, 2015).

1958 when the dependence of industrial society on coal was still taken for granted). There is also a hint of the redemptive power of music in the song – when all else fails, “we’ll live on songs and hope instead,” or so the lyrics claim in the sixth stanza. But ultimately, this is a song not about rescue and salvation, but about the tragic inescapability of death. As the penultimate stanza puts it, “Eight days passed and some were rescued / Leaving the dead to lie alone / Thru all their lives they dug their grave / Two miles of earth for a marking stone.” Here, the dead miners almost take on an ontological significance: they illustrate the human condition as a whole.

“The Ballad of Springhill” is but one, albeit prominent example of the important place that the figure of the coal miner occupied in the “second” English folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This post-war revival shared with its inter-war progenitor the aversion to commercialised mass culture, but looked towards working-class communities, rather than the peasantry, as the wellspring of “natural” folk culture. Coal miners, who were thought to live in “occupational communities” in isolated “industrial villages,” commanded particular interest among the folk revivalists of the post-war period. In many ways, the coal miner, more than any other type of industrial worker, appeared to embody a fusion of the traditional and the modern, the socially progressive and the culturally conservative (Mitchell 2014; Lloyd 1967, 316-411).

Folk songs were one medium through which the figure of the coal miner entered the popular imagination. There were other channels of diffusion, following the conventions of their specific genres, but etching into public consciousness a coherent set of attributes that defined the coal miner and the nature of his work. Of particular resonance was a body of writing from the first half of the century that was set in Britain’s coalfields and which, by the 1970s, had long acquired the status of canonical texts. Among the most influential were the novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) by D. H. Lawrence, set in Nottinghamshire; *How Green was my valley* (1939) by Richard Llewellyn, set in South Wales; and George Orwell’s travelogue *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), which discussed conditions in Yorkshire and Lancashire.⁷ They all traded in images of coal mining that stressed the gruelling nature of the miner’s work but also the close-knitted community life. The classical tradition was supplemented by the work of Barry Hines, who followed up on his early success of *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968), a bleak coming-of-age novel set in a mining village, with two plays for television that revolved around life in the Yorkshire coalfield, *The Price of Coal* (Hines 1968, 1979). They were first broadcast on television in 1977 (directed by the young Ken Loach) and appeared in print two years later. Hines’ work was inspired by a mining accident at Houghton Main Colliery in June of 1975, which had killed five miners and seriously injured another. As the sub-

⁷ For a collection of literary representations see: *Coal* (1997).

ject matter of the play indicates, disasters played an important role in the employment of the miner's experience. Indeed, the prominence of the pit disaster in feature films was such that one historian has claimed that "a mining film without a disaster is like a Western without a shoot-out" (Hogenkamp 2005). Pit disasters were depicted as collective experiences affecting the entire pit village and exposing the vulnerability of the occupational community (Mohun 2016, in this HSR Special Issue).

Finally, there were the published autobiographies of miners' leaders. These texts typically opened with childhood memories of accidents in the pit which would involve close family and friends. In his autobiography *Incorrigible Rebel*, Arthur Horner, General Secretary of the NUM from 1946 to 1959, set the tone when he wrote,

From my earliest childhood [...] I felt the shadows of the pits [...] Then one Sunday, somebody left a ventilator door open in the Glynmeal Level, and my grandfather, going in at the evening to examine the pit, was blown to pieces by an explosion. They collected his remains with a rake, and brought them home in a sack [...]. I learned very early that there was blood on the coal (Horner 1960, 11).

Twenty years later, Joe Gormely, President of the Union from 1971 to 1982, struck a similar chord in his autobiography, *Battered Cherub*:

It was to be only six more years [after the young Gormley's first experience of mining at the age of 10, JA] before I knew those dangers for real, when I brought my first dead colleague out of a mine. He was a collier, and a huge stone had fallen on him and killed him outright. Then I understood. The understanding was helped when my father died down the mine, and then later when my son was badly injured down the mine (Gormley 1982, 2).

While the examples can be considered indicative of the literary conventions governing the genre of miners' memoirs, they also point to the very real experiential basis to the trope of "blood on the coal." They describe as a regular occurrence events that were, by definition, extraordinary, and not only in the distant past or in faraway countries. In 1947, the first year after the nationalisation of the industry, 612 coal miners were killed down the pit. And although 1947 was rather unusual, well over one hundred people would get killed year after year in the two decades that followed (Ashworth 1986, 556). And yet, by the time "The Ballad of Springhill" reached a mass audience in the rendition of Irish rock band U2 in 1987, British coal mines had become a much safer place indeed. As the official history of the British coal industry notes,

Most of the improvement dated from the later sixties, i.e. from the time when modern mechanised methods had become general and familiar, and many of the most antiquated pits had been closed; and there was further improvement in the later seventies (Ashworth 1986, 557).

By the 1970s, a gap had opened up between the social reality of health hazards in the industry, on one hand, and popular representations, on the other: Popular

culture continued to trade in images of coal mining – “bone and blood is the price of coal” – that, although not entirely superseded, had become much less common. In some respects, the popular image of the coal miner had started to take on a life of its own, revelling in the dangers to which coal miners had been exposed in the past and glorifying them. This was recognised by some observers at the time. In a House of Commons debate on the coal dispute of 1972, Conservative MP Peter Fry, for example, commented, “I have seen the conditions under which miners have to work. It is still a dangerous and dirty job, though not quite as bad as the public image has it – which owes too much to reissues of ‘How Green was my Valley.’”⁸ At the same time, the argument can easily be overstretched. In the 1970s, there occurred seven accidents during which more than five miners were killed each, at Cynheidre-Pentremawr (1971), Lofthouse, Seafield, and Markham (1973), Houghton Main (1975), Bentley (1978) and Golborne (1979).⁹

While accidents and disasters were perhaps the most well-known dangers in the industry, they were not the only ones. The risk of contracting an industrial disease was far more widespread. Particularly dangerous was pneumoconiosis or miner’s lung – a scarring of the lung tissue caused by the persistent inhalation of coal dust. In the words of historians Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, miner’s lung represented “the largest occupational health disaster in British history.” It claimed 40,000 lives between 1930 and 1990 (McIvor and Johnston 2007, 2 and 54). The poem “Pneumoconiosis,” written by Welsh poet Duncan Bush and published in 1985, captures well the nature of the disease as a condition that accumulates over long periods of work underground and which progressively disables the sufferer (Bush 1985, 25). “This is The Dust: / black diamond dust / I had thirty years in it, boy, / a laughing red mouth / coming up to spit smuts black / into a handkerchief,” the poem opens. “I take things pretty easy, these days; one step at a time. / Especially the stairs,” the lyrical “I” comments sarcastically. The disease was also incurable, in its worst form slowly strangling the sufferer, leading to a painful death. As the last stanza put it, “I saw my own brother: rising, / dying in panic, gasping / worse than a hooked / carp drowning in air. / Every breath was his last / till the last.”

Although the poem adopts the voice of the first person singular, it is a work of art rather than of autobiography. The author Duncan Bush, while hailing from Wales, had no first-hand experience of mining, but received his education in seminar rooms at the Universities of Warwick, Duke (North Carolina) and Oxford. The condition that Bush described was widespread in mining villages, but miners themselves did not tend to talk about it through the medium of lyri-

⁸ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 14 February 1972, coll. 82-85, here: 84.

⁹ See The National Database of Mining Deaths in Great Britain, 2015, compiled by Ian Winstanley, in *The Coalmining History Resource Centre*, provided by Raleys Solicitors <<http://www.cmhrc.co.uk/site/disasters/index.html>> (Accessed April 24, 2015).

cal poetry. Arthur Horner, for example, speaks rather more prosaically of the “men with the deadly dust in their lungs, waiting only for death” as a constant presence during his childhood at the turn of the twentieth century. Likewise, Labour MP Eric Varley, Secretary of State for Energy from 1974 to 1975, recalled “the rasping pneumoconiotic cough which has been my father’s keepsake for 50 years’ work in the coal mining industry” (Department of Energy 1974a, 1).

Rather than as a direct reflection of lived experience, the poem is perhaps better understood as another indication of the special cultural resonance that coal mining and coal miners enjoyed in the UK. This fascination fed on images that were largely drawn from the past; it appears to have shifted from the cultural mainstream to the counter-cultural margin over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. This disjuncture between memories of past dangers and present conditions was recognised not just by Conservative politicians such as Peter Fry mentioned above, but by miners’ leaders themselves. In contrast to some outside observers, however, miners did not bemoan the demise of the sacrificial side of mining, but took it as evidence of successful struggles and of the progress that had been achieved since the nationalisation of the industry in 1947. To be sure, there was still a long way to go until mining could be considered an occupation like any other, but much had been achieved. As Horner noted in 1960, “Today we have secured great advances in safety measures, but the fear of sudden death or mutilation still hangs over the miners and is felt in every mining village” (Horner 1960, 11). While the miners’ leader readily acknowledged the progress that had been made in the management of risk since his childhood days, he also stressed that memories of past disasters could cast a long shadow, inducing powerful fears among mining communities that lingered on in the present.

3. “Blood on the Coal” as Political Resource

While the cultural resonance of coal miners as deserving of admiration and sympathy remained strong throughout the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s, the political bargaining power of the “blood on the coal” image decreased significantly, as a close reading of selected debates in the House of Commons on the industrial disputes of the 1970s and 1980s makes clear.

The coal strikes of 1972 and 1974 were, in the first instance, conflicts between capital and labour, which, in this case, were represented by the NCB on the one side and the NUM on the other. Yet, the strikes, which lasted from 8 January 1972 to 28 February 1972 and from 9 February 1974 to 11 March 1974, respectively, quickly acquired a political dimension, drawing in the Con-

servative government under Edward Heath.¹⁰ This was partly due to the nature of the British coal industry, which had been nationalised in 1947. The terms of nationalisation required the Coal Board to seek recourse to government funding in order to finance investment programmes and, as was the case in 1972, large wage claims of the workforce. The considerable pay rise for which the miners struck was also feared to have a knock-on effect on other sectors of industry. The demand was thus perceived as a challenge to government economic policy, which aimed to curb inflation. The main reason, however, lay in the effectiveness of the strikes, which not only stopped the production of coal, but also, through picketing, succeeded in preventing the movement of coal to the power stations. In both instances, the government was forced into adopting emergency measures to maintain the supply of essential services, such as introducing power cuts and putting industry on a three-day week. In February 1974, a beleaguered government saw no other solution but to call a general election under the heading of, “Who governs Britain?”

Both strikes were debated extensively in Parliament. Reading the debates from the early 1970s it is remarkable just how widely the underlying sentiment about the character of coal miners and the nature of their work was shared across the floor of the House, despite contrasting views on the justification of the coal strike. The miners commanded sympathy and respect not just among their “natural” supporters in the Parliamentary Labour Party, but also Conservative backbenchers and even ministers of the Heath administration. This was despite the fact that the government had opposed the strike from the beginning and was increasingly alarmed over the broader political and societal consequences.

In a debate on 18 January 1972, for example, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, John Davies, sought to put across the government’s view that the strike action was unjustified and likely to cause “self-inflicted wounds” to the industry as well as “great inconvenience” to the public at large.¹¹ Yet he felt compelled to open his speech with a declaration of respect for coal miners, stressing that “the men who work in [the coal industry] rightly evoke our sympathy and admiration.” “Sympathy and admiration” grew out of what Davies called – rather tersely – “the character of the industry – with its ruggedness and dangers.”¹² Similar sentiments were expressed on the Conservative backbenches. Geoffrey Stewart-Smith, MP for Belper in Derbyshire, declared that

¹⁰ For an account of the strikes from the Coal Board’s perspective, see Ashworth (1986, 289–316, 329–41). For an account focusing on the NUM see Taylor (2005, 49–109). For the government’s perspective see the autobiographical account by Edward Heath (Heath 1998, 349–53, 503–16).

¹¹ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 18 January 1972, coll. 228–37, here 231 and 236 (for the quotations).

¹² Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 18 January 1972, coll. 228.

one must have sympathy with [the miners] [...]. They work in conditions of damp and wet. They spend one-third of their lives underground. They have to compete with gas, fires, pneumoconiosis, bronchitis, and all the other hazards. They have a quiet courage which [...] enables them to follow this dangerous way of life every day.¹³

As was to be expected in view of the close links between the industrial and political wings of the British labour movement, members of the Parliamentary Labour Party waxed lyrical about the nature of coal mining. In one passionate contribution the MP for Derbyshire North-East, Thomas Swain, explicitly invoked the health hazards in order to push the case for coal: “Let us look at the price that is paid in human terms,” he exclaimed.

In 1972, 92 men were killed in the coal mines of Great Britain – nearly two a week; since 1947 6,500 men have lost their lives underground in the coal mines. This is the story in human terms. This is the other side of the picture when one considers the price of coal. No economist in the world can measure the price of coal in money terms without bearing in mind the human terms in loss of life.¹⁴

Swain gave additional weight to these figures by drawing on his own lived experience, telling the House that he had worked in a pit for 34 years and that his own father had been killed down a pit.

In the context of the national coal strike of 1972, the argument that miners were entitled to special treatment due to the dirty and dangerous nature of their work carried much conviction across the political spectrum. It also featured prominently in the conclusions reached by the independent Court of Inquiry chaired by Lord Wilberforce, which would eventually settle the strike on the union’s terms. “Other occupations have their dangers and inconveniences, but we know of none in which there is such a combination of danger, health hazard, discomfort in working conditions, social inconvenience and community isolation,” as the Court of Inquiry put it (*A Special Case* 1972, 123-44, here 133).

If the trope of “blood on the coal” was politically useful in the 1970s, it was, however, also a double-edged sword, and potentially damaging to the miners’ cause, as was recognised by the Conservative MP Sir Anthony Meyer. In his contribution to the debate on 18 January 1972, Meyer, too, paid tribute to the miners, declaring that “the miners deserve our sympathy for the dangerous job they do.” Yet, at the same time, he cautioned that occupational health hazards were an ambiguous political asset: “We should be careful, because if we were to follow too far the [...] emotional line [...] it would lead inevitably to the conclusion that mining was so dangerous that it should be forbidden, as sending children up chimneys was forbidden.”¹⁵ This ambivalence was shared by

¹³ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 18 January 1972, coll. 274.

¹⁴ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 18 January 1972, col. 290 et seq.

¹⁵ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 18 January 1972, col. 314.

Her Majesty's Opposition as well. In December 1973, during a parliamentary debate on the general economic and energy situation and with another national coal strike looming, the Labour MP Roy Mason ended his passionate defence of the miners' cause on a personal note. He told the House of the 14 years that he had spent down the pit and of the "awful memories" he held of this time. He had seen men killed by his side and his father crippled for life. "Working underground in a coal mine is not a life for any man," Mason exclaimed.

It is not fair on his wife. It is not fair on his family. It is a pity that we cannot close all the mines tomorrow-but we cannot. The nation depends upon them. That is why we must pay the miners, and pay them well, until that day of the final closure gloriously arrives.¹⁶

As Mason's intervention made clear, the force of the "blood on the coal" argument hinged on the premise that coal mining was not just dangerous, but also beneficial, and indeed essential, to society at large – and not just historically, but also in the present and the future. Miners braved great dangers, turning them into heroes and victims, not out of romantic adventurism, but because industrial society depended on the availability of a steady supply of coal. With around two thirds of the nation's electricity supply generated by the burning of coal, Mason's premise was still grounded in social reality in the early 1970s (Ministry of Power 1967, 285; Department of Energy 1974a, 7). However much the market share of coal had declined since the late 1950s and however outmoded the fossil fuel seemed in comparison to oil, natural gas and nuclear power, the normal functioning of British society could not be sustained for long if the coal miners collectively decided to withdraw their labour. This lesson was brought home to policy makers and the public at large by the power cuts that the government felt impelled to introduce during the coal strikes of 1972 and 1974.

Ten years later, by the time of the miners' strike of 1984/85, the nature of the debate on risk and coal mining had changed.¹⁷ No longer did the view command cross-party support that coal miners, whatever the merits of their specific demands, were deserving of admiration and sympathy. Rather, there had emerged a powerful competing narrative which held that the real danger lay not with hazardous working conditions, but with the miners themselves. They were portrayed as "wreckers" and dangerous subversives embarked on an "insurrectionary" course who must be stopped in their tracks lest Britain become ungovernable. Risk in this sense was expounded most famously by the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, herself. In a speech held before a Committee of backbench MPs on 19 July 1984, she spoke of miners' leaders as "the enemy within" who were "just as dangerous [as the enemy without] but more

¹⁶ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 19 December 1973, col. 1390 et seq.

¹⁷ For a history of the strike from the perspective of the NUM see Taylor (2005, 173–234); for an account from the government's perspective see Thatcher (1993, 339–78). For the refusal of Nottinghamshire miners to join in the strike see now: Amos (2015).

difficult to fight.” For emphasis, the speaking notes added the repetition, “But just as dangerous to liberty / Scar across the face of our country.”¹⁸ While the Prime Minister expressed her verdict in characteristically uncompromising terms, the underlying sentiment itself was hardly new. Ever since the re-emergence of industrial conflict in the coal industry in the late 1960s, self-styled “militants” had been labelled as “wreckers,” “enemies” and “subversives” by their opponents both inside and outside the labour movement. No less a figure than Joe Gormley himself, president of the NUM from 1971 to 1982, spoke of “wreckers” and “antis” when describing the conflicts inside the Union over the question of incentive schemes and wage claims in the period following the successful strikes of 1972 and 1974 (Gormley 1982, 146-72).¹⁹ To some extent, Conservative vilification of striking coal miners in 1984/85 could draw upon discursive practices which the NUM itself had helped to popularise during the internecine struggles of the 1970s. Likewise, miners’ leaders had contributed to blunting the force of the “blood on the coal” argument by invoking it in the internal debate over productivity schemes (Parkin 1974; Routledge 1974).

The Thatcher government’s perception of coal miners as the “real” danger was in part a legacy of the bitter memories left by the strikes of the early 1970s, which were deemed to have caused the downfall of the previous Conservative government. Yet arguably more important still were the events of February 1981 when the National Coal Board hastily withdrew a programme of pit closures in the face of a strike threat by the NUM (Ashworth 1986, 430-43). The sudden policy reversal was widely interpreted as a humiliation not just for management, but the Conservative government itself, whose Coal Industry Act of 1980 had put severe pressure on the Board to bring down costs. As the left-leaning sociologist Vic Allen commented in a piece called, “The Miners on the Move” in the journal *Marxism Today*: “Even the Thatcher government has bowed before the miners.” What was more, the government’s response to the strike threat, he argued, “contained all the elements of hysteria which had marked Heath’s behaviour in 1973” (Allen 1982, 17).

Allen’s assessment, minus the sense of satisfaction, was shared inside the government. Influential government advisor and head of the Policy Unit, John Hoskyns, considered the withdrawal of the closure programme as a major defeat, as he made clear in a note to the Prime Minister on 27 March 1981. While “even before the election, it had been clear to anyone that the NUM posed a serious threat to the government,” recent developments had called into doubt

¹⁸ Margaret Thatcher, “Speech to 1922 Committee”, 19 July 1984 <<http://www.margaret-thatcher.org/document/105563>> (Accessed June, 23 2015); “Thatcher makes Falklands link: attack on ‘enemy within,’” 1984, *The Times*, July 20.

¹⁹ Lord Robens, chairman of the NCB during the 1960s and ex-Labour MP and government minister, likewise wrote of “subversive[s]” who were “out to damage not only the industry, but the country as a whole” in his autobiography in 1972 (Robens 1972, 33).

the government's authority and strengthened the position of the union.²⁰ The Cabinet's official think tank, the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), concurred in a note composed six weeks later.

The withdrawal of the accelerated closure programme has greatly weakened the government's position. It has left the NUM with the initiative on all fronts [...]. The danger is not confined to coal. It is undermining the credibility of the Government's whole stance on economic and industrial policy.²¹

In the estimation of senior advisors, then, the Thatcher government had been humiliated at the hands of the NUM, with collateral damage extending far beyond the coal industry itself. After all, the Conservatives had returned to power in 1979 on the promise that they would initiate a "new beginning" by controlling public expenditure, standing up to the trade unions and "restor[ing] incentives so that hard work pays" (Conservative Party General Election Manifestos 2000, 266).

In the aftermath of the U-turn on the coal industry, the government made frantic efforts to define the precise nature of the danger and to devise a strategy capable of blunting in future what was described as "NUM power." A memorandum by the Policy Unit, dated 22 May 1981, identified the ability of mineworkers to project an image of themselves that commanded the respect and sympathy of the British public as one of the sources of their power. "Even though Scargill may be the ideal NUM figurehead [for the government on account of his radicalism], the fact remains that miners are seen to be (and most people with any direct contact would say they are) the 'salt of the earth,'" the paper conceded. The caveat in brackets was revealing, for it allowed for the possibility that the miners' special qualities might be more than a matter of skilful self-projection, but indeed be rooted in social being, making them an even more formidable opponent.²² The memorandum suggested that the government take steps to undermine this image or at least to neutralise it. "Could we take out some insurance against grievance building up and public sympathy for the miners by, for example, a much publicised visit to a mine, perhaps in one of the most hard-hit areas, by the Prime Minister?"

The Treasury, in another contribution to the debate, argued along similar lines, but took a more forceful stance. It pressed the case for

mounting [...] a major PR campaign on the costs imposed on the taxpayer by the coal industry. Its aim would be to bring home to the British public that the inefficiencies of the NCB, together with the attitude of the miners to such questions as closing down the high cost uneconomic pits [...] are imposing a

²⁰ "Lessons of the NUM strike threat," March 27, 1981, The National Archives [TNA], PREM 19/540.

²¹ "Cabinet Ministerial Committee on Economic Strategy / NCB finances / Note by CPRS," May 11, 1981, TNA, PREM 19/540.

²² "The NCB/NUM problem," May 22, 1981, TNA, PREM 19/540.

real growing burden on the economy. [...] The NCB and the NUM will be able to hold the nation to ransom unless the pressures of public opinion can be brought to bear upon the industry to modernise itself.²³

The idea that the government needed to “operate on public opinion” in addition to taking more specific measures such as increasing coal stocks at power stations and switching to oil burn also found its way into a major study on “the NUM/NCB problem” that the CPRS had co-written with the Policy Unit and which was presented to the Prime Minister on 31 July 1981.²⁴ As the study made clear, “The government needs to counter a public tendency to sympathise with the miners, based on the history of the mining industry, and bad conditions under which underground miners still work, and – since the energy crisis on the importance of British coal.”

When the strike finally came, in March 1984, the Thatcher government was ready and a communication strategy in place. Much was made during the conflict of the notion that, from a fiscal perspective, the nationalised coal industry had turned from an asset into a liability. As the Conservative MP for Ludlow, Eric Cockeram, exclaimed in an acrimonious debate in the House of Commons on 26 November 1984, “It is time that the miners were told that they cannot expect endless subsidies from working people earning less than they earn.”²⁵ Miners were recast in the role of privileged (and ungrateful) recipients of “tax-payers’ money” rather than in their apprised role of hard-working people who were prepared to sacrifice limb and life for the benefit of the nation (note the juxtaposition of miners to “working people” in the quotation). Viewed from this angle, miners seemed less deserving of admiration than of scorn; they were more akin to “benefit scroungers” than “best men in the world.”

Against this backdrop, the NUM’s argument that the strike was about the preservation of a way of life, was met with derision by Conservative MPs, and the “blood on the coal” trope turned on its head: As the MP for Sherwood, Andy Stewart put it in the House on 28 March 1984:

We hear that this dispute is about jobs for our children and grandchildren. Are those people saying that in the year 2020 we shall be sending more people down holes in the ground than we are now? What a Luddite vision! Have they not heard of technology, or are they so blinkered that they have not noticed the disappearance of the pit pony? [...] If every miner's wife had one wish, it [...] would be that her children would never have to go down the pit to earn a living.²⁶

Or, as the Conservative MP for Cannock & Burntwood, Gerald Howarth, remarked sarcastically in the same debate,

²³ “NCB Finances,” May 13, 1981, TNA, PREM 19/540.

²⁴ “CPRS Study of the NUM/NCB problem,” July 31, 1981, TNA, PREM 19/541.

²⁵ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 26 November 1984, col. 743 et seq.

²⁶ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 7 June 1984, coll. 473–475.

Are the Opposition seriously suggesting that output should be increased from 100 million tonnes to 135 million tonnes? What will we do with the stock-piles? [...] Is it to be poured back down the pits to be pulled out again by young miners to allow them to become ill with pit diseases?²⁷

In some respects, the two Conservative backbenchers articulated the same vision that Labour MP and ex-miner Roy Mason had expounded in December 1973. Yet the implications for mineworkers under which the arrival of “the day of the final closure gloriously” was imagined could not have been more different. Whereas one vision pictured heroes who would live out their retirement in material comfort and be amply rewarded for their sacrifice by the gratitude of society, the second vision pictured dispossessed industrial proletarians cast aside by progress before their time, left to scrape by as best as they could under the mistrustful gaze of the guardians of the public purse.

4. Conclusion

By the time that radical historian Raphael Samuel described British coal miners as engaged, “in the last analysis, in daily wager with death” in 1985, safety in the industry had become much improved, but memories of past hazards continued to command a strong pop-cultural and counter-cultural resonance. Yet, at the centre of the political decision-making process, dangerous working conditions past and present no longer bestowed sympathy and respect, but were referred to as yet another example that British coal mining, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, “had come to symbolize everything that was wrong with Britain” (Thatcher 1993, 340). From this perspective, it was the miners themselves, or at least their leaders, who had turned into a risk for the well-being, and indeed survival, of Britain as a prosperous capitalist nation and stable parliamentary democracy.

Thirty years later, the nature of the debate on coal and risk had changed again. On 17 March 2015, *The Guardian* launched its “Keep it in the Ground” appeal.²⁸ The public campaign was designed to put pressure on two major charitable organisations to disinvest from the 200 leading fossil fuel companies in order to help prevent climate change.²⁹ To this end, readers were urged to sign a petition which insisted that it was “morally and financially misguided to invest in companies dedicated to finding and burning more oil, gas and coal.”

²⁷ Hansard, House of Commons Sitting of 7 June 1984, coll. 494.

²⁸ Alan Rusbridger, 2015, “These are the most polluting coal, gas & oil companies in the world. Are you helping to fund them?,” *The Guardian*, March 17. For a critique see Matt Ridley, 2015, “This demonising of fossil fuels is madness,” *The Times*, May 18.

²⁹ For the historical background of the debate on the link between global warming and coal see: Freese (2003, 182-97); for earlier debates on coal as a pollutant *ibid.*, *passim* and Thorsheim (2006).

In the editorial explaining the rationale behind the campaign, Alan Rusbridger, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, stressed the great hazards for mankind that were posed by the continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels. Conjuring up a temporal horizon of one generation, he underlined the need for immediate action: "If we and our children are to have a reasonable chance of living stable and secure lives 30 or so years from now, according to one recent study 80% of the known coal reserves will have to stay underground, along with half the gas and a third of the oil reserves." The campaign was illustrated visually by a black hexagon inside a brown square, presumably symbolising coal lying buried in the ground.

Around the same time that the appeal was launched, *The Guardian* did not just look into the future, but also into the past, commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the great miners' strike of 1984/5. Yet the newspaper drew no connection between the "Keep it in the Ground" appeal of 2015 and the struggle of 1984/85, which had been waged under the slogan of "Coal not Dole." Indeed, the industry in defence of which the miners had struck was hardly mentioned at all. Instead, the anniversary reporting focused on the theme of "community" and the changes that the strike had wrought. In a so-called "witness blog," readers were invited to tell their stories and share their memories. The website presenting a digest of the responses was captioned by the quotation, "I fought not just for 'my pit,' but for the community." Meanwhile, prominent *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne castigated the government of the day for their "scorched earth onslaught on Britain's mining communities" while Owen Jones found inspiration in the unlikely alliance that had been forged during the strike between mining communities and the Gays and Lesbian Rights Movement, as celebrated in the 2014 feature film *Pride*.³⁰

The Guardian thus managed to celebrate the struggle and sacrifice of historical coal miners while at the same time exposing as a threat to the survival of mankind the very practice around which their lives had revolved and for which they had struck, the extraction from the ground, under often extremely dangerous conditions, of the fossil fuel coal. The campaign was indicative of broader shifts in British culture, in which the heritage of coal mining was cherished and the historical miners, along with ethnic and sexual minorities, depicted as victims of Thatcherism, while the ongoing risks of coal mining (and other dirty and hazardous occupations) were left to be borne by others living in countries far away.

³⁰ "The miners' strike 1984-85," 2015, *The Guardian* <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/miners-strike-1984-85>> (Accessed April 23, 2015).

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